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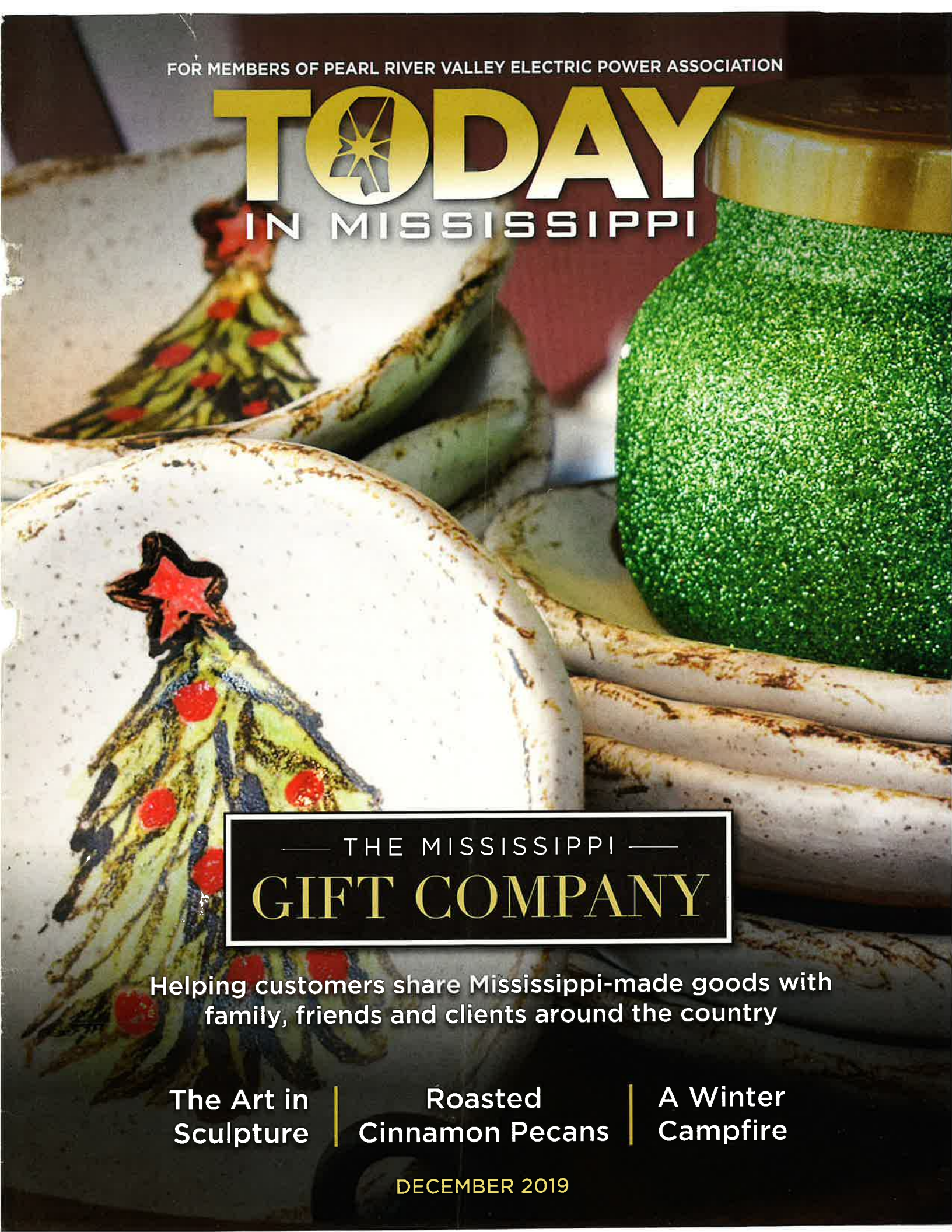

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DECEMBER 2019

Christmas movies

As you are aware from past columns, I am a big fan of Christmas and all that comes with it. Over the last couple of years, with my wife's prodding, I have really gotten into the Hallmark Christmas movie craze. Katlyne, my oldest daughter, refers to them as "happy sappy" movies. I like them. The plots are easy to follow: boy meets girl, they don't like each other, they are forced to work together, they begin to fall for each other, some misunderstanding tears them apart, the misunderstanding is corrected, they confess their love for each other and share a passionate kiss. What's not to like?

Paul, ECM's head of government relations, also enjoys Hallmark Christmas movies. The other day at lunch, we were discussing them and picking our favorites. Also with us were two younger members of the team, and they were watching us with looks of disbelief and pity as we talked about plots and actors. (I guess 30-year-olds have more interesting lives than those of us in our fifth decade!) One of them, Hunter, chimed in with, "My favorite Christmas movie is 'Die Hard.'" I quickly explained to him that "Die Hard" is not a Christmas movie; rather it is merely a movie set during Christmas, much like "Lethal Weapon." Several minutes of discussion ensued, and the ultimate question presented itself to us: what makes a movie a Christmas movie?

After much deliberation, here is a set of criteria that I hope can help us determine if a movie is indeed a Christmas movie:

First, the movie must be set during the Christmas season; that is a given. Second, the movie must espouse some of the following virtues: love, hope, faith, joy, concern for others, belief in something and self-sacrifice. Third, it must contain a miracle. (Now by miracle, that could be a ghost, a visit from an angel, Santa Claus, talking animals or some miraculous occurrence of an unexplained phenomenon.) Fourth, lives need to be impacted for the better. (Seriously, if nothing good happens, how can it be a Christmas movie?) Fifth, no more than two people can die, which takes out "Die Hard" and "Lethal Weapon." (After all, happy endings, while not a necessity, are preferred.) And lastly, the movie should be family-friendly.

I admit, not all of Hallmark's "happy sappy" movies are Christmas movies — some are just love stories set during Christmas, but I enjoy them anyway.

A few of my favorite classic Christmas movies are "Miracle on 34th Street," "A Christmas Carol" (with George C. Scott as Scrooge) and, of course, "It's a Wonderful Life." But, my very favorite Christmas movie is "Annabelle's Wish." Even though it's a cartoon, it's a great movie and I tear up every time I watch it. Heck, my eyes are beginning to water now just thinking about it!

This Christmas season, gather the family and watch your favorite Christmas movie — or maybe it's just a movie set during Christmas. Regardless, what matters most is spending time with people you love.

Merry Christmas!

by Michael Callahan
Executive Vice President/CEO
Electric Cooperatives of Mississippi

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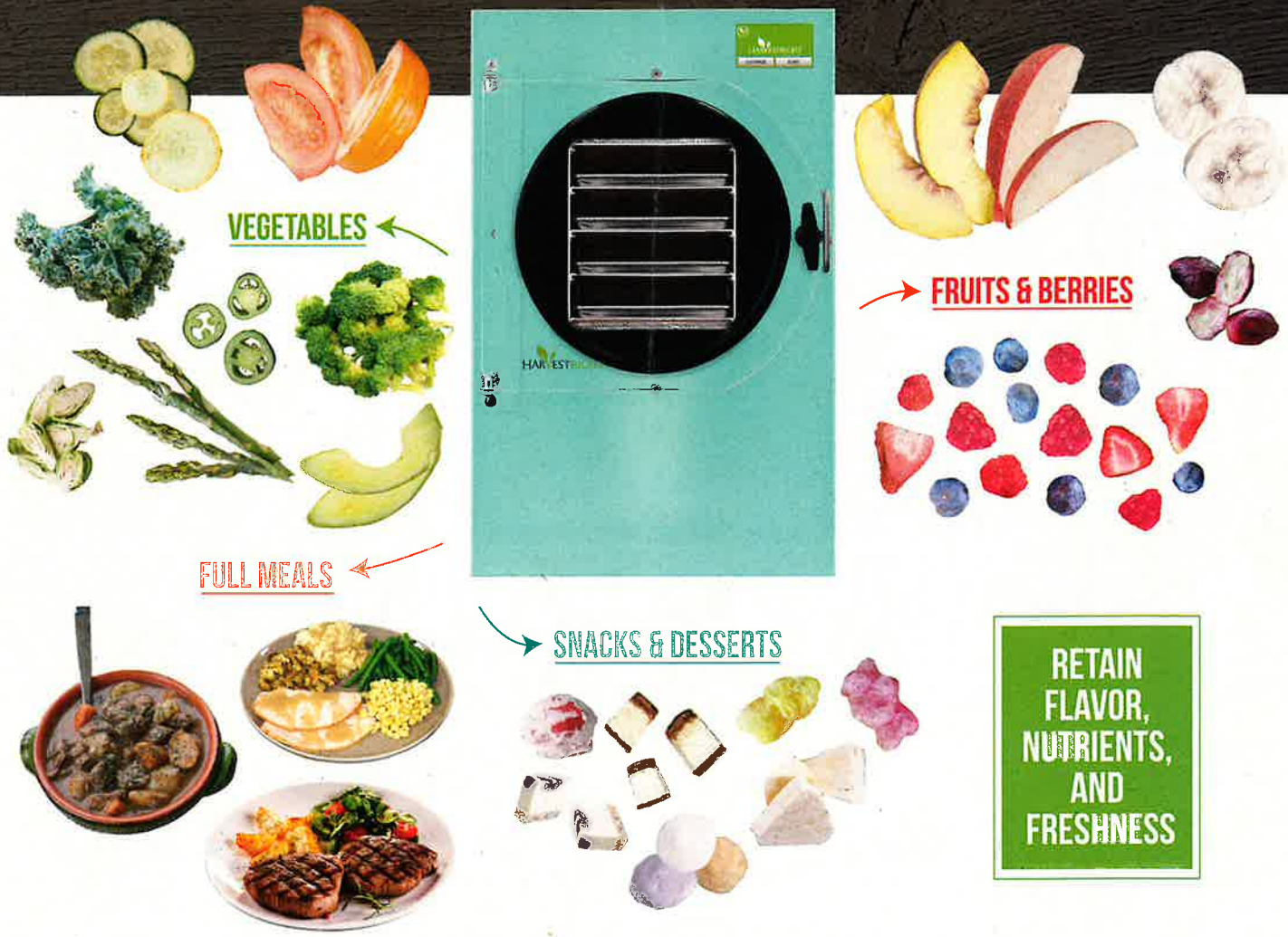

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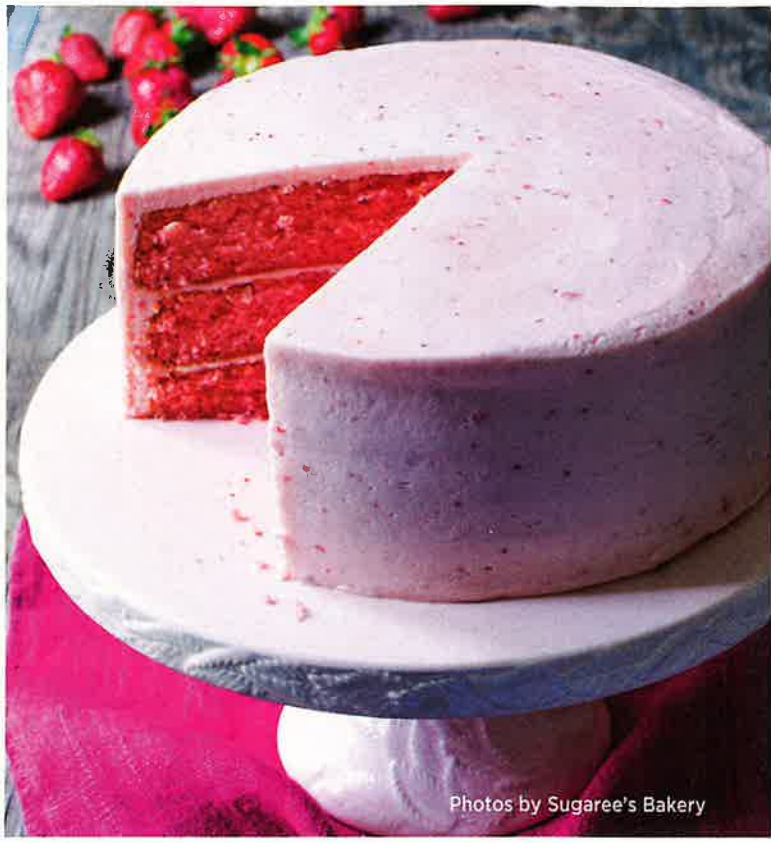

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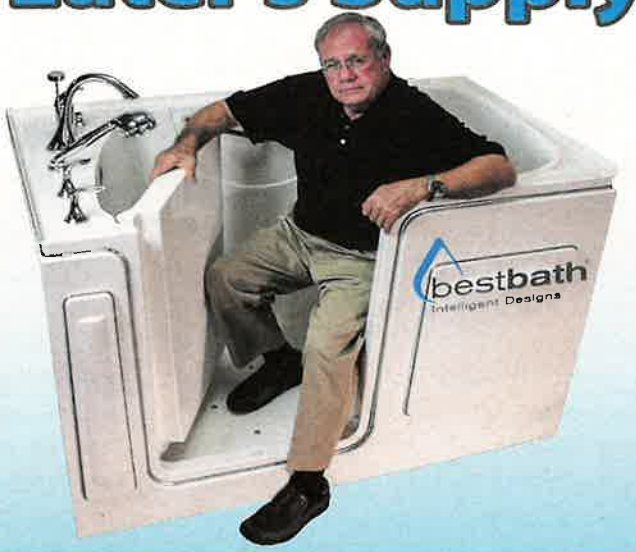

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BEAN FRUIT —COFFEE—

is brewing up a perfect cup

by Sandra M. Buckley

Paul Bonds is a coffee connoisseur. While he didn't start out that way, as a young adult he developed a strong appreciation and passion for it and learned the art of roasting coffee beans. That led him to launch BeanFruit Coffee Company in Pearl, where his hand-selected coffees are roasted and then distributed to restaurants, coffee shops and other retailers all across Mississippi — as well as to consumers at home throughout the country.

"Prior to starting the business, I was buying coffee from reputable coffee roasters all over the U.S.," Bonds said. "After tasting many coffees, I started roasting coffee at home. It basically started as a hobby that transitioned to a part-time business, and finally I went full-time with it in 2012."

To meet customer demand, the BeanFruit facility utilizes two drum-style coffee roasters that are capable of roasting up to 1,500 pounds of coffee in one day. Another key to the company's success has been its commitment to provide the highest quality product. To do so, Bonds, who earned a business degree from Mississippi College, works with coffee importers across the country finding sustainable, green coffees.

"We want to offer our customers the best of the best coffees," Bonds shared. "We work to select coffees from farmers who produce their coffees using sustainable methods. These coffees are not only better for the environment, but also tend to yield better results in the cup. It's a win-win for the farmer and the buyer."

BeanFruit is especially dedicated to making it easy for connoisseurs to brew up and enjoy a perfect cup of coffee at home — or to share as gifts — by offering a variety of coffees, available as whole beans or freshly ground, sampler packs and other related products online. "The majority of our online orders are from Mississippi, but we do receive quite a few orders from customers all over the U.S." Bonds added. "We've shipped coffees as far as Alaska and Guam."

Visit www.beanfruit.com for more information.

Christmas -on- DEER CREEK

opens the season in splendor and sparkle

by Nancy Jo Maples

Christmas on Deer Creek marks its 55th anniversary this year as Leland hosts its unique tradition of welcoming the holiday season, which will be on display from November 30 until December 31.

Splendid homes facing the creek feature tasteful décor and window candles. Lighted trees along the creek add sparkle, and anchored floats, evenly spaced along the creek, tell the story of the birth of Christ and showcase snowmen, carolers and seasonal symbols.

November 30 is the kickoff, as a children's parade rolls at 3 p.m. featuring folks 12 and younger riding on decorated bikes and in decorated strollers pushed by parents. The evening includes community singing and culminates with the arrival of Santa, at 5:30 p.m., in his sleigh drifting down the creek in a motorized float. Afterwards, he poses for free pictures.

Leland, located about 7 miles east of Greenville, is also home of the late Jim Henson, creator of Kermit the Frog. A museum in his memory, Jim Henson's Delta Boyhood Home Exhibit, will offer visitors free gifts and photo opportunities with Kermit on the day of the creek event.

"I remember coming to Leland as a child at Christmas time to ride around the creek to look at the floats and the beautiful homes all lit up," said Mary Anne Brocato, of the Leland Chamber of Commerce. "It was always one of my favorite things at Christmas. When my children were young, we brought them to Leland to see the floats and lighted Christmas trees. Now that I live here, I still enjoy the beauty of it."

Call 662-686-2687 for more information.

Nancy Jo Maples is an award-winning journalist who has been writing about Mississippi people and places for more than 30 years. Contact her at nancyjomaples@aol.com.

TALES around a WINTER CAMPFIRE

Some will conclude late fall or winter a flawed time for camping. Too cold; too damp; too consumed by ballgames; too choked with holiday festivities. And there is an element of truth in these objections; however, there are exceptions. I elect to focus on those exceptions and go camping, usually in the travel trailer but often in canvas. When in canvas, a woodstove is employed, its pipe transitioning inside to out through that protective collar in the tent's roof.

And there are parameters for winter camping. How cold is too cold? That is the camper's decision. I once spent four nights in a Montana blizzard when the thermometer never rose above 21 below. Yes, below zero; and yes, in a wall tent. We could do little more than sit and feed the stove with split aspen, not the most viable fuel. That was too cold. But Mississippi and surrounding areas are not so brutal. Surely, there will be cold but some not too-cold days and nights available. And those other factors mentioned above can generally be circumvented. So, a quick camping trip could be in the making.

What are you to do on that trip? Be quiet and reflective if possible. Walk to water's edge at dawn and absorb the majesty. Watch those tenuous and feeble fingers of fog drift upward to greet sunrise. Listen for the first crow's caw or the lonesome honk of geese. Admire the morning sky. Take time to be thankful.

And always spend ample time enjoying one specifically alluring entity of camping. I discovered decades back that the most intriguing aspect of a camping trip is the fire.

"Campfires afford a captivating picture of life, one form of matter giving off heat and serving that purpose for which it was selected and then bursting heavenward to live on in another form.

And let it be noted that a campfire is not relegated to a camp. It can be just as memorizing in the backyard as it is at the campground.

Campfires afford a captivating picture of life, one form of matter giving off heat and serving that purpose for which it was selected and then bursting heavenward to live on in another form. It is also therapeutic. Watching it heals, soothes, sands off frayed edges that have become ragged. And it does this sanding with supple cloth minus chafing. Gently; quietly; in caring fashion.

Campfires induce story telling. Several of us recently sat entranced as the fire danced and flickered and stories began to flow. One was about Frank, a local personality. A jovial guy, Frank toys with peanuts. Each fall he boils monstrous amounts and gives them away. He told me recently that he loved boiled peanuts, but noted they had begun to hurt him. I immediately offered my condolences. He said that after eating about two gallons at a time, he got this pain in his side. We all went to warm beds and waited with great expectation for a new winter's morning.

by Tony Kinton

Tony Kinton has been an active outdoors writer for 30 years. Visit www.tonykinton.com for more information.

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(Photo courtesy of PRCC Public Relations)

Round Up for Education scholarship winners

Recipients of Round Up for Education scholarships at Pearl River Community College (PRCC) were on hand at a reception in November for a ceremonial check presentation from Pearl River Valley Electric Power Association General Manager Randy Wallace to PRCC President Dr. Adam Breerwood. A total of 214 students who live in PRVEPA's 12-county service area received awards for the fall 2019 semester, including 127 at PRCC.

Round Up for Education scholarships also went to 26 students attending Jones County Junior College this year and 44 students at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, as well as 17 students attending nine other Mississippi community colleges. Each student received $500.

Thank you to all the members who are supporting the Round Up program and helping to improve the quality of life for everyone living in the communities we serve. After seven years, nearly 1,500 students have received a total of more than $1.2 million in scholarships.

Tropical Storm Olga caused major outages in October

Pearl River Valley Electric workers were faced with unexpected system-wide outages after the remnants of Tropical Storm Olga passed through the state in the early morning hours of Saturday, October 26. Ultimately, more than 18,000 members lost service in the wake of heavy rain and wind gusts that followed several days of ground-saturating rainfall. All districts in the Association's 12-county service area were affected.

PRVEPA crews, assisted by several contractor crews, worked steadily through Saturday restoring service. Numerous trees were knocked down by the storm, pulling down lines and snapping poles. Several transmission lines from Cooperative Energy were also damaged, causing outages to substations at Goss and Oakvale. Those substations were both re-energized around noon Saturday. After working until nearly 11 p.m. that night, all but about 2,000 members had their service restored.

All crews were back in the field — mainly in the Columbia district — at daybreak Sunday morning and had virtually all members restored by early afternoon.

"This was similar to some hurricane situations we've experienced, in terms of drenching rains followed by steady, heavy winds," said Kurt Brautigam, manager of member services. "Many trees in our region cannot stand up to such conditions, so restoring service became a long process of finding isolated damage and making repairs, often in remote areas. Even after our primary assessment at the beginning of Saturday, new areas of damage were located throughout the day. Overall, Saturday was long and tiring, but the crews made significant progress.

"Sunday was spent reaching the remaining, most isolated areas and responding to members who had to make repairs to their homes. We very much appreciate the patience and support of our members during this time. And I commend all of our employees, who worked very long hours to ensure that our members were restored to service as quickly as possible."

The Amazon Echo Plus is one of the most popular smart speakers available on the market today. Photo credit: Amazon

Is your smart home speaker smart for your energy bill?

Have you ever wanted to turn off the lights, listen to the news or order food by simply using your voice? That is the innovative power a smart home speaker can provide. These handy products have made their way into many homes across the country since the first smart speaker became available in late 2014. By the end of last year, there were 66.4 million users of smart home assistants or smart home speakers in the U.S.

These smart speakers can truly act as assistants, whether by helping you set reminders, establishing routine commands or informing you of today's top news stories. They include numerous functions, like helping you order products online, playing music — they can even tell you a joke!

One in four Americans now own a smart speaker, and 40 percent of those people have more than one. The most popular is the Amazon Echo, although Google Home products are selling at a rapid rate and even taking over some of the market share from Amazon. Other popular brands of smart speakers include Apple's HomePod, the Sonos One and the JBL Link 10.

Smart speakers have clearly become a big hit in the residential market, and they are also economical with varied price points. Google Home starts at about $129, and the Amazon Echo starts at about $180. However, there are smaller, more basic versions that start at $25 for the Amazon Echo Dot, and $49 for the Google Home Mini.

> **One in four Americans now own a smart speaker...**

As smart speakers become more prevalent, you may be wondering if these products are a smart choice when it comes to the impact they have on your energy bill. Tests have been conducted to determine how much power a smart speaker uses, including different modes of use, such as when the assistant is on standby mode or listening to a command. Moderate-level actions, like playing music at full volume, have also been tested.

By way of example, the Amazon Echo speaker uses 3 watts of electricity while on standby; and if it were left on standby mode for one year, the total cost would only be about $3.15. While moderately active (like telling a joke or playing music at a medium volume), the Amazon Echo uses 4 watts. At the highest power use (like playing music at full volume), the Amazon Echo still only uses 6.6 watts, and if used consistently at this level, it would cost $6.93 for the year. For comparison, the Google Home uses slightly less energy than the Amazon Echo at 2 watts while in standby mode, saving you about $1 a year in total energy costs.

As you can see, the costs to use smart speakers are minimal, and the difference in prices between available products and their abilities are still relatively small. There are plenty of reasons to buy a smart speaker, and the additional cost to your energy bill should not stop you from getting one.

MISSISSIPPI CHEESE STRAW FACTORY

A good business idea leaves a lasting legacy for Yerger family

by Elissa Fulton

Most of us wish for that one good business idea — the idea that will put us on the map. When a decades long career in food service was winding down, Mary Margaret Yerger knew she had a good idea that could put her on the map. She had worked in school cafeteria food service for many years and was responsible for feeding more than 5,000 students in Yazoo City every day.

After Yerger lost her husband, she had to support her five young children. She began working as cafeteria manager for Saint Clara's Catholic School, and after a number of years, moved to the public school system as food service supervisor. She maintained a catering business in addition to her day job. One of her signature party items was her delicious cheese straws.

In 1989, Yerger had the idea to start a business selling her cheese straws as a retirement project and asked two of her sons, Hunter and Robbie, to join her. They went to work researching, creating a business plan and finding the appropriate commercial grade equipment. And Mississippi Cheese Straw Factory was born!

While the first year was challenging, the family was making sales and cheese straws out of Mrs. Yerger's kitchen by November 1991.

"The first person we made contact with was Carol Daily who at that time owned Everyday Gourmet in Jackson, and she bought the first production," said Hunter. "After that, we began to sell to gift and drug stores primarily in the Mississippi area. In that first two-month period during the Christmas season, we sold nearly $100,000 worth of cheese straws we made in mother's kitchen."

Within a few months, as sales flourished, the Yergers moved the business into a 400-square-foot building near Mrs. Yerger's home, and within another year to downtown Yazoo City where they built their first production plant. Mrs. Yerger worked a few more years before retiring for good, with her sons assuming ownership of the business. Hunter now serves as president and CEO and oversees planning, marketing, product development and business aspects while Robbie, vice president and general manager, oversees the day-to-day production and operations.

Today, from their 35,000-square-foot location on Eighth Street, the company manufactures a variety of cheese straws and flavored cookie straws, as well as baked goods for large brands distributed all across the United States. The company ships to and sells products in all 50 states.

"Made in America" showcase at the White House. Robbie and Hunter Yerger visits with Vice President Mike Pence.

This year, the company was invited to represent the State of Mississippi at the White House for the annual "Made in America" product showcase and met Vice President Mike Pence. The exhibitors were able to listen to a speech from President Donald Trump and watch as he signed an executive order mandating a higher percentage of "Made in America" products for federal procurement.

"This was such a fantastic experience," said Hunter. "We are truly honored to have been a part of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to represent our company and our state. We have been truly blessed and gratified, especially to the people of Mississippi, to have been able to bring mother's idea to life. We've learned many things along the way and are truly just a 28-year overnight success."

Mississippi Cheese Straw Factory products are bringing joy to consumers across the state and beyond, thanks to a good idea, a long-term vision and years of hard work.

Visit www.cheesestrawfactory.com for more information.

GIVE THE GIFT of MISSISSIPPI

Celebrating the talent, creativity and entrepreneurial spirit within the Magnolia State

by Sandra M. Buckley

In 1993, newlyweds Cindy and Tim Tyler of Greenwood had a novel idea for a new business. The idea was to launch a fundraising company that schools could partner with to sell Mississippi made products as a way to raise money. What they soon discovered, however, was that their efforts would have a better chance at success if they dreamed even bigger — and so they shifted from a school fundraising concept to direct consumer-based sales.

As the couple launched their startup as The Mississippi Gift Company, they refocused its mission, taking a visionary approach. Not only were they marketing top quality products to individuals, but also to an untapped niche in the form of corporate gifts — allowing their business model to double its consumer base.

Business began to boom, and they soon opened a storefront. "At that time, we were the only retail store in downtown Greenwood," Cindy said, adding that they also took a chance and created a mail order catalog. "We borrowed our brother-in-law's camera and shot the catalog in the empty parking lot next to our retail location. The catalog gave us the appearance of a large company at the time and helped grow our business."

Such pioneering thinking is what then took the company to the next level. "We were one of the first companies to have a website and worked to build a site on one of the first ecommerce platforms available in 1997," explained Cindy. "It was during the days of dial-up and took forever for the site to load. This really helped grow our customer base."

Today, Cindy runs the business full time and has created a convenient hub, both in store and online, for exceptional Mississippi made gifts, decorative accessories for the home and gourmet food items. And the storefront is now more than a retail shop; it's a unique shopping experience and a tourist destination. "We have visitors from all over the world visiting our business to find something unique to take home from their travels," she said.

"We also have online customers in every state in the United States that love to give a gift of Mississippi," Cindy added. "We have customers all across the state, the country and a few orders overseas from time to time to send something to their loved ones in the U.S."

Over the past 26 years, the business has successfully expanded its brand and established itself as the first — and only — company dedicated to exclusively selling Mississippi products. It also maintains the largest selection of Mississippi made items available anywhere, with more than 750 product offerings handcrafted by more than 150 Mississippians.

The range of products is vast, from handcrafted dinnerware, pottery, picture frames, decorative pillows, candles and jewelry to original artwork and photography as well as cookbooks and coffee table books. And, gourmet food products are equally in demand, including bread mixes, salad dressings, salsas, pickles, cheese straws, cakes, pies, cookies, dessert mixes, local honey, appetizer and dip mixes, nuts, sauces, marinades, soup mixes and more. As an additional convenience, gift cards, a bridal registry and a wish list for customers are also available.

"We are so fortunate that there are so many talented artists, potters, chefs, craftsmen and gourmet food entrepreneurs in our state," Cindy noted. "When someone receives a gift from The Mississippi Gift Company, they know the gift is high quality, handmade and made in Mississippi."

Cindy, a graduate of Mississippi State University, has not only helped connect Mississippi makers and their goods with customers, she has also established lasting relationships with them. "I have become great friends and developed wonderful relationships with the artisans whose goods I sell," she shared. "We love that we are a part of their story and have played a certain part in introducing their product to new customers who love Mississippi."

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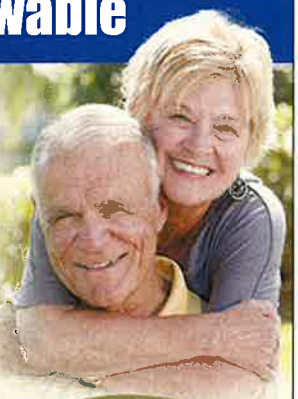

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On a Weber style kettle grill, add half a gallon of unlit charcoal on one side of the grill. Light a half-gallon of charcoal in a chimney and pile on top (keeping it all on one side) of the other charcoal. Place the turkey on the grate on the opposite side of the kettle from the fire. Also, place the vent of the grill opposite the fire so that the airflow will pull the heat across the turkey on the grill. Be sure and add your wood chunks before placing the bird on the grate, opposite the coals.

On a Kamado style smoker, just use the plate setter or the regular method for indirect heat. I can give you times, but every bird is different and so is every grill, but after about 2 to 3 hours, add more charcoal or add more air for the purpose of bringing the grill temperature up to 350 degrees. Baste the bird with the Swamp Butter until the internal temperature of the bird is 165 degrees. Remove from grill. Rest your trophy for 20 minutes and then slice and serve.

It's a little bit of work, but the end result has had folks begging for more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chef Andy Chapman lives in Gulfport where he owns and operates Eat Y'all, a business that helps farmers and food producers connect to chefs around the globe who are looking for better ingredients. Andy would love to hear how your turkey turns out. Contact him at andy@eatyall.com or 601-852-3463.

Beer Swamp Butter

INGREDIENTS

2 cups salted butter
1 (12-ounce) beer *(I like to use a medium beer or an ale if you have one.)*
1 ½ tablespoons of your favorite barbecue rub *(We use June Bugg All Purpose Seasoning, but you can use any rub you like. June Bugg has coffee in it; so it really works well in this, trust me. This rub is going on the outside of the turkey, so set this aside.)*
1 ½ tablespoons paprika
1 tablespoon fine ground black pepper *(I usually use coarse on everything; but trust me, it has to fit through the injector needle, so fine grind is required here.)*
1 tablespoon sea salt
1 tablespoon garlic powder
1 tablespoon onion powder
1 tablespoon white pepper
1 tablespoon mustard powder
1 teaspoon cayenne pepper *(Double this if you want to taste the spice, or go less if you have an especially spice sensitive crowd.)*

Melt the butter at a low temperature. Whisk in the beer. Whisk all of the other spices into the liquid. Once it's well blended, remove the mixture from the heat. Do not boil. While liquefied, inject the turkey.

Traditionally, pecan servings come from pies and pastries. The unnecessary calories and added sugars found in desserts overshadow any health benefits. While pecan pie has its place, think past sweets and incorporate more raw pecans into your diet. Pecans come in several forms, such as whole, halves, pieces, granules and meals. Their rich, buttery flavor makes them a perfect pairing for both savory and sweet foods. Enjoy raw pecans by sprinkling some over salads or into wraps. Top off your oatmeal or Greek yogurt with a spoonful of pecan pieces. Add pecans to homemade whole wheat pancakes, waffles or muffin batter. Try pecan butter for a different twist to PB&J.

This winter, be good to your heart and mind and opt for pecans in unexpected places.

Roasted Cinnamon Pecans

These lightly buttered, cinnamon roll inspired pecans are satisfying without the guilt

INGREDIENTS

½ pound pecans
1 tablespoon butter
⅛ teaspoon salt, or more to taste
¼ teaspoon stevia, or more to taste
1 tablespoon cinnamon
¼ teaspoon vanilla extract (optional)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Roast pecans for 10 to 15 minutes. Melt butter in a saucepan large enough to hold pecans after roasted. Stir in remaining ingredients and set aside. Toss hot roasted pecans in saucepan with melted mixture and stir to coat. Serve slightly warm or cooled. Refrigerate leftover pecans.

Healthier Pecan Pie Bars

A healthier twist to the traditional pecan pie

INGREDIENTS

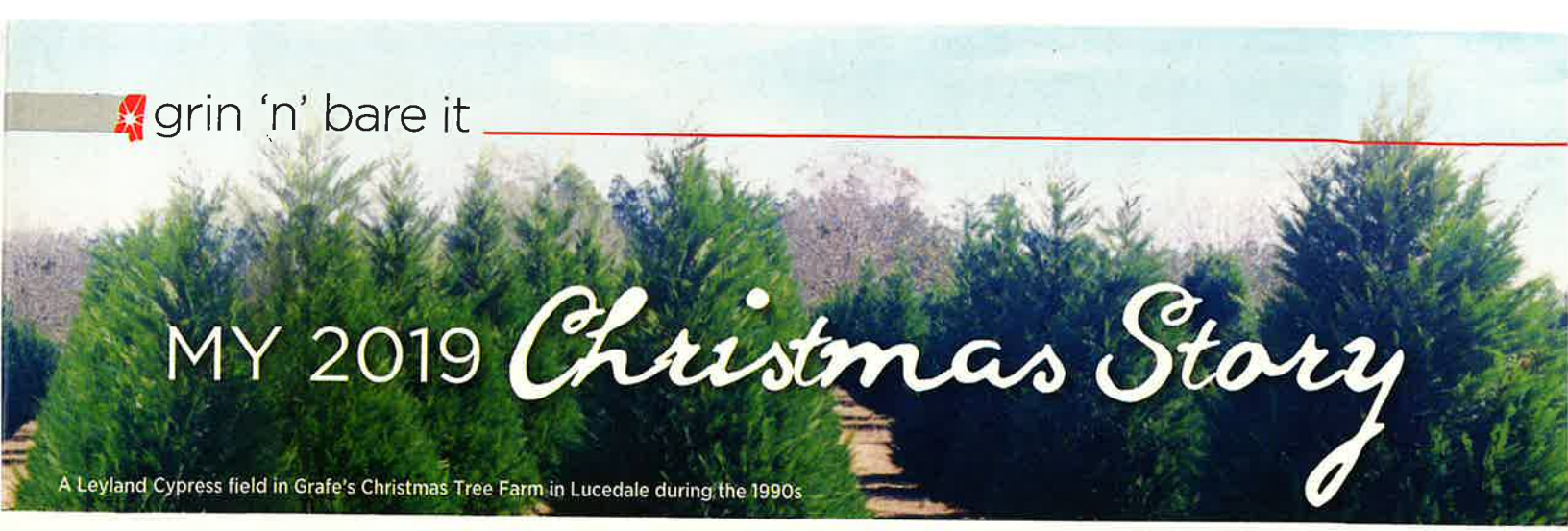
1 store-bought pie crust
1 stick butter
¼ cup maple syrup
⅔ cup sugar or sugar substitute
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 tablespoon milk
2 cups chopped pecans

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Bring refrigerated crust to room temperature. Roll out to line the bottom of an 8x11-inch baking dish. Bake crust for 10 to 15 minutes or until slightly golden brown. Let crust cool completely. In a saucepan, heat butter, sugar (or sugar substitute), maple syrup and vanilla until boiling (about 3 to 4 minutes), stirring constantly. Once boiling, continue to stir but let bubble for one minute and then turn off heat. Stir in milk and pecans. Mix well. Pour pecan mixture over cooled crust and bake in the oven for 15 to 20 minutes. Let cool and then refrigerator for several hours or overnight before cutting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Turner is an author, registered dietitian, radio host, television presenter and a certified specialist in sports dietetics with the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. A lifelong Mississippian, she has spent the last decade offering no-nonsense nutrition guidance that allows you to enjoy good health and good food. Her book, "Mind Over Fork," challenges the way you think, not the way you eat. Find her on social media and online at www.theRebeccaTurner.com.

MY 2019 Christmas Story



A Leyland Cypress field in Grafe's Christmas Tree Farm in Lucedale during the 1990s

It's that special time of the year again. And after more than 20 Christmas stories, I still get excited when it's time to write another one. It's such a wonderful and blessed time of the year. A few days ago, as Mr. Roy and I sat together on the patio and sipped our afternoon cup of coffee, I said, "It's the first day of November and time to write my annual Christmas column; give me some ideas." He said, "Since this may be the last Christmas article you write before retirement, why don't you just say what comes to your mind and from your heart."

So, dear readers, that's what I am going to do. During a period of 25 Christmas seasons, Mr. Roy and I operated a tree farm where we grew and sold Christmas trees. Even though the work was hard and the days were long, this was a very enjoyable part of our lives. We did this as a hobby or second job because we both had career jobs. Some readers of "Grin 'n' Bare It" remember visiting our farm and buying a tree.

Our selling season began Thanksgiving weekend and literally lasted until Christmas Eve night. Almost every year we would have someone ring our doorbell on December 24th, apologize for bothering us, and ask if they could get a tree. In most cases, the father had been out of town on a job and had just arrived home that night. Mr. Roy would always tell the anxious family to drive out in the field and he would meet them there. Those families were always so happy and excited to get a tree and were very appreciative. And the one thing that made all of the hard work associated with our tree farm worthwhile was how happy the children and parents were.

During the later years, we had young fathers or mothers tell us, "My parents brought me out here when I was a child to get our trees, and now I am bringing my children to enjoy the experience." Statements like that made Mr. Roy and me so happy. I will always have fond memories of our tree farm and the wonderful friends we made during those years.

Like many of you, in a few weeks Mr. Roy and I will go into a storage room, pull out our beautiful artificial tree and set it up in the den. And as we sit there drinking our coffee, we'll admire the tree, but long for the ones that we planted, raised to maturity and enjoyed so much. I can still smell the sweet, fresh aroma of a real tree.

I asked Mr. Roy if he ever remembered hearing families argue or fuss while they were picking out their tree. He told me he could not recall a single instance of that. Wouldn't it be great if we could live every day as if we were going to pick out our Christmas tree? And that is what this season is all about. Nothing is more important than love of family, love of friends and love of Christ. As we celebrate this wonderful season and the prospect of a Happy New Year, imagine that every day we are picking out our Christmas tree. And when you see a family member or friend, take time to say, "I love you!"

And to my faithful readers, as many of you have been for over 25 years, Merry Christmas, Happy New Year and I love each and every one of you.

by Kay Grafe

Contact Kay Grafe at kaygrafe@bellsouth.net.

Triple Treat CHRISTMAS MERIDIAN

VISIT MERIDIAN

TREES of CHRISTMAS at Merrehope

"Sing A Song of Christmas" will come to life at the 51st Trees of Christmas. More than 30 trees will be exquisitely decorated to represent your favorite Christmas songs. Take a guided tour of Antebellum Merrehope (circa 1858) and Victorian F.W. Williams (circa 1886) historic homes.

NOV. 21 - DEC. 30
2019 OPENING GALA
Nov. 21, 5-7 pm
DAILY TOURS
Mon.-Sat. 9-5 • Nov. 22 - Dec. 30
Sundays 1-5 • Dec 15, 22, 29
905 Martin Luther King Jr. Dr.
601-483-8439 • merrehope.com

LAZY ACRES in LIGHTS

Lazy Acres in LIGHTS is one of Mississippi's top Christmas light displays. Tour the farm, see the elves in Santa's workshop, meet the farm animals in Animal Acres and see Mississippi's largest hand painted nativity scene.

NOV. 28 - DEC. 25
WAGON RIDES
Thanksgiving & Christmas • Fri. & Sat.
Hours: 6pm - 10pm
DRIVING TOURS
Sun. - Thurs. • 6pm - 9pm
596 Lazy Acres Rd. Chunky
833-327-6386 • lazy-acres.com

SANTA'S CHRISTMAS FACTORY

Snow flurries falling, plus Christmas train rides, plus Holiday Spirit equals Santa's Christmas Factory. Tour the historic Soulé Steam Works in downtown Meridian decorated with thousands of lights and toys for this family-friendly event. Santa will be visiting at night.

TUESDAYS - SATURDAYS DEC. 10 - 21
Dec. 10 - 14 | Day 9:30 - 3:30
Night (Fri. 13 & Sat. 14 only - 5-8)
Dec. 17 - 21 | Day 9:30 - 3:30
Night (Fri. 20 & Sat. 21 only - 5-8)
Downtown @ 1808 4th St.
601-693-9905
santaschristmasfactory.com

SEASON of Lights

The old folks used to call it "Christmas gift." Or perhaps it was pronounced "Chrizmus giff." It's an unexpected pleasant surprise that happens during the holidays. I first heard it in association with visitors showing up on our doorstep. There would be a knock on the door and mama would open it and holler, "Christmas gift!"

Well, I just had some "Chrizmas giffs" happen to me as I sat at my computer to write this article — pleasant surprises that otherwise would have never happened.

First off, I had to fire up an old computer to see if any of my missing TV story scripts were stored there because I was searching for a few things in particular that I wanted to make sure I had factually correct — names and places and things like that — that I have learned the hard way not to leave up to my memory.

There were a gillion files in there — things I hadn't seen in years. Things I had forgotten about. Things I thought I had lost. Not only the scripts I was looking for but no telling how many photographs and bits and pieces of stories I had started to write but never got any further than the first day.

And music I downloaded from Internet services that have long since fallen by the wayside. So as I started "Charlie Brown's Christmas" on the old computer, I remembered the task at hand and turned to write this that you are reading now.

I was looking for Morie Moore's name. He was an elderly man (probably younger than I am now, but this was from 30 years ago) who was the first person I ever met who did elaborate Christmas light displays. I did a story with him one Halloween night at his home out in the hills of Yazoo County where he was already stringing up strands of Christmas lights. He started early so he would have them all up by Thanksgiving.

He built all sorts of frames on which to hang the lights — geometric patterns and poles like clotheslines with strings strung blinking between them. His was the only light show on his road that year. A few years later, all of his neighbors had one.

And then there was the big light show Earl Boyd started in the Salem Community in Walthall County that wound up being the origins of the annual Tylertown "Christmas in the Water Park" display.

Now there are lights all over the place this time of year. Everywhere there is a waterway there are some type lights, from Biloxi's Christmas on the Water to the floats (that really float) in Deer Creek at Leland. And you don't EVER want to miss Canton's decorated town square.

All of those lights are "Chrizmas giffs," in a way — pleasant surprises someone started and others pitched in on and enlarged or started anew until this really is the Season of Lights nowadays.

by Walt Grayson

Walt Grayson is the host of "Mississippi Roads" on Mississippi Public Broadcasting television and the author of two "Looking Around Mississippi" books and "Oh! That Reminds Me: More Mississippi Homegrown Stories." Contact him at walt@waltgrayson.com.